

Literature and the Arts in Medical Education

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Feature Editor

Editor's Note: In this column, teachers who are currently using literary and artistic materials as part of their curricula will briefly summarize specific works, delineate their purposes and goals in using these media, describe their audience and teaching strategies, discuss their methods of evaluation, and speculate about the impact of these teaching tools on learners (and teachers).

Submissions should be three to five double-spaced pages with a minimum of references. Send your submissions to me at University of California, Irvine, Department of Family Medicine, 101 City Drive South, Building 200, Room 512, Route 81, Orange, CA 92868-3298. 949-824-3748. Fax: 714-456-7984. jfshapir@uci.edu.

Using Young Adult Literature to Teach Adolescent Medicine

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How does a teen with cystic fibrosis separate from his family when he relies on them as his source of medical care? How can a teen develop normal peer relationships when she's busy counting the cracks in the sidewalk on the way to school because she has obsessive-compulsive disorder? We have all been adolescents, yet it may seem in the distant past for many. Each one of us experiences this time in life differently. To be able to provide health care to this age group, one requires knowledge of and exposure to the vast variety of events and emotions that adolescents experience. The added burden of having a medical

or psychological problem makes the adolescent years more complicated still.

Paying attention to the adolescent voice can allow health care providers to better understand what their teen patients are thinking and feeling. One such medium for accessing this coming-of-age viewpoint is the use of young adult literature, that is, fictional literature written for the 11–19-year-old reader, usually with an adolescent-aged protagonist. The young adult literature format ranges from poetry written by teens to short stories, novels, and memoirs.

Reading young adult literature about teens with medical problems, such as an eating disorder in *My Sister's Bones*¹ or obsessive-compulsive disorder in *Kissing Door-knobs*,² can be a valuable tool in teaching learners about adolescents. This teaching strategy can help them understand a deeper level of adolescent development and adjustment that may not ordinarily

emerge in a routine office visit or through a didactic presentation.

In our pediatric residency program and third-year clerkship, we offer several formats for using young adult literature to teach about adolescent medicine. These teaching methods consist of a workshop for reviewing available literature and its use, discussion of adolescent poetry in a clinic setting during pauses in patient care, and additional outside reading during the resident rotation through adolescent medicine. Other possible formats include participating in a young adult literature book club³ or guiding residents in the selection of books for teenage patients that contain specific medical issues.⁴

Poetry is an effective means of opening up discussion about what adolescents may be thinking and feeling. The brevity and poignancy of many poems make them especially good for "micro teaching" or as an introduction to a more didactic session. For example, we have

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successfully used a poem called "The Essence of Adolescence" by Anne Gepford and Katie Shaw from *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul III* as an icebreaker in a didactic session on adolescent developmental issues. This poem reflects a teen in angst, torn between growing up and staying a child making snowmen and collecting "treasures." Participants each read aloud one stanza of the poem. This activity gets them involved in the topic and helps them "hear" the voice of the adolescent. Next, participants use brainstorming to reflect on whatever comes to mind as they read/hear the poem. Themes such as conflict, volatility, being controlled, eloquence, desire for independence, change, and regret often are addressed. Participants also can reflect on the range of emotions that the poet feels and how this relates to normal adolescent development. Finally, participants can discuss the use of poetry and the adolescent voice in poems to help providers learn more about adolescents.

Young adult novels and memoirs that contain key characters with medical or psychiatric health issues also serve as a springboard for discussions about adolescents. Often these books are "quick reads" for a resident or student, and even a single chapter can usefully be examined. In follow-up discussion, one can consider the character and how the illness presents. What does the teen think about the illness? How do they live their lives around their disease? Does this teen differ in his/her development because of the disease? Did the reader learn anything about the disease by reading the book?

Learners can also explore how the illness affects the teen's daily life and interactions with family. How does the illness impact the adolescent's interactions with his or her peers and school? Does the illness affect the character's future plans? Is this a true reflection of how adolescents cope with medical

conditions? How is the patient viewed by the family? What role does this character play in the family? Do the roles change with the addition of the health concerns? How does the family cope with the illness?⁶

Further, such discussions can consider how the teen interacts with the health care system. What is the relationship like between the teen and health care providers? Is there establishment of trust and sensitivity to patient issues? Is treatment appropriate? What suggestions does the learner have for improving the health care for this patient, given that they now have greater insight into the character's life? How would the learner imagine an interview with this teen?

Lastly, the learners can review literature itself as a piece of art. How well does the piece reflect its key point? What audience is it addressing? What other themes are developed in addition to the health issues? How well does the book and its characters interpret the life of someone with this particular illness?^{6,7}

One example of this literature-based teaching strategy is the way we have used *Kissing Doorknobs* by Terry Spencer Hesser² with a group of graduate students. This novel's audience is middle school and high school students. The main character is Tara, an 11-year old girl, who begins a series of behaviors that significantly interfere with her relationship with her friends and family. These behaviors, such as counting cracks in the sidewalk so she won't "break her mother's back," kissing her fingers and then touching a doorknob, and reciting prayers over and over, are evidence of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Tara and her family make trips to multiple doctors, however, before they finally connect with a provider who understands the diagnostic implications of Tara's behaviors and begins the process of helping her extinguish them.

Students were instructed to read the book and come to class prepared for a group discussion. Criteria for diagnosing obsessive-compulsive disorder were distributed from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) IV*⁸. Learners correlated passages in the book with each of the diagnostic criteria. Tara's response to her disease and its impact on her relationships with her family and peers were covered. Other topics included Tara's interaction with the health care system and the difficulty in diagnosing and then treating her illness. Learner feedback reflected that the book increased their understanding of the presentation of this mental illness in an adolescent, as well as the range of the disease's impact. Learners agreed that they each had a better picture of what youth with OCD must be feeling and thinking in their daily lives.

There are many novels geared toward young people that contain characters with medical and/or psychological health concerns that can give students or residents an "inside" feel regarding what it may be like to have such a health issue. Examples of books include *Deenie* by Judy Blume, about a girl with scoliosis; *Imitate the Tiger* by Jan Cheripko, whose protagonist is an alcoholic teen in rehabilitation; *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* by Jack Gantos, dealing with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; and *Cut* by Patricia McCormick, exploring the experiences of a girl who uses self-mutilation to make herself feel better. Eating disorders have been written about in fiction such as *My Sister's Bones* by Cathi Hanauer¹ or in memoir as with *Stick Figure: A Diary of My Former Self* by Lori Gottlieb. *Icy Sparks* by Gwyn Rubio, a novel about a girl with Tourette's Syndrome, gives a personal and historical perspective on this illness.

Young adult literature provides an excellent teaching tool to assist medical students and other learners in developing an understanding of

how adolescents cope with medical and mental health problems by focusing them on the "voice" of a teen protagonist. Teaching methods can range from formal classes or discussion akin to journal clubs to using a missed clinic appointment slot to read and discuss a poem or short story. There is a growing collection of novels, poetry, and memoirs that contain teenaged characters affected by health issues.⁴ Adolescents display a wide range of emotions and responses to illness and to the health care system. Such literature can play an important role in teaching health care providers

more about these emotions and how to provide better care to adolescents.

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